

Advocacy in Action

You Can Advocate for Your Child!

Even when they do not seek the position, parents of children with disabilities or gifts and talents often find themselves acting as advocates for their children. While they may advocate for changes in federal, state or provincial law, more often, parents advocate for changes in their child's placement, a teaching strategy, or local policy.

To help parents advocate successfully, CEC asked Trina Oasher, Director of the Family Leadership Initiative and member of CEC Chapter #263, to share some tips with our members. Following are her suggestions.

Get All the Information You Can

The first step to successful advocacy is to gather information. Learn what is happening in the school; get copies of school records, as well as information about any tests or evaluations affecting your child; and talk with your child's teacher to learn his or her view of areas of concern.

You should also learn about special education law and its protections. You can obtain this information from the school's special education or guidance director, state departments of education, or parent information and training centers, as well as organizations such as CEC. Because the laws can be complex and difficult to understand, you might want to work with a parent advocate, who can explain the law, as well as special education procedures.

Last but not least, talk with your child to learn his or her view of the situation and what he or she thinks will help. Even young children have a keen sense of their stress points and what could be done to make it easier for them to succeed.

What Do You Want the School to Do?

As your child's advocate, you need to be clear about what you want the school to do. Be able to explain what you are happy with, unhappy

with, what you want changed, and how you want it changed. For example, if a child is having difficulty completing homework, you should say whether you would like the assignment to be changed or for it to be provided on tape.

To learn about the different options available, you could talk with other parents who have children with similar problems. Ask the school for contact names.

Be A Good Communicator

Communicating well with your child's teacher and other school personnel is essential to your advocacy efforts. Keep in mind that the school's interest is the same as yours - you both want the best for your child. In your dealings with the school, be honest and develop a positive relationship with the teacher and other staff. Start where the concern is, usually the classroom teacher. Only move up the chain of command if you must.

Being diplomatic can be hard when you are concerned about your child's welfare - you want to get feisty. But, get feisty only if that is what it takes.

Bring a Companion to Meetings

Bring a companion, a friend or advocate, with you to school meetings. This person can help you listen, take notes so you are free to concentrate on what is happening, and help you understand what happened afterwards. In addition, your companion can help slow you down if things get too emotional.

Don't Be Afraid to Say No

Don't be pressured into making a bad decision. You can always say no, ask for more information, or for more time to consider a proposed solution. Take the time to consult with experts and people you trust in the community, then get back to the school with your decision.

Due Process

If your child has a disability, you can use due process to resolve disputes with the school, but it should be a last resort. Often, due process proceedings turn the school and parents into adversaries. It is much more beneficial to maintain a positive relationship with the individuals who will work with your child.

Making Your Voice Stronger

One of the best ways to make your voice stronger is to band together with other parents facing similar situations. To learn of other parents who share your concern, give the school a sheet of labels containing your name and address and a statement that you would like to meet other parents facing a similar issue.

When you meet with other parents, share your experiences. As a group, develop some proposals to solve the problem. The parent should then meet with the individual(s) who will be affected. For example, a group of parents who want to get computers in the resource room would meet first with the resource room teacher. This approach allows the parents to build a strong partnership with the teachers. Then teachers and parents can build an alliance, which can be particularly effective in creating change.

Local Advocacy

To effect change locally, you will increase your chance of success if you work with others. In addition to getting the support of other parents, build coalitions with community groups that have an interest in your policy or project. Next, reason out your positions and put them in writing. It is helpful to have data to back up your positions. Be sure to present more than one solution to the problem, as well as tasks your group is willing to assume to achieve your proposed changes.

Then distribute your proposals to various groups and get their input. Also, if you are going to present your proposal to the school board, try to get the support of the school administration and faculty beforehand. You will also improve your stand if you can get other civic groups to approve your plan. Finally, you can use the press to push your issues, but you should only use the media judiciously. A positive way to promote your proposal would be to present it as parents and educators working together to improve educational services. For example, parents and teachers working together to get computers for the students would make a great story and garner further support.